

LODI

Incorporated October 20, 1988

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 3

LODI HISTORIAN

SUMMER 2005

JOHN MARION POSEY

by Ralph Lea & Janice Roth

In 1934 John M. Posey told his life story to his daughter, Estella (Posey) McKenzie when he was 71 years old. This is the first part of the early pioneer's life.

John M. Posey, vineyardist and real estate dealer lived all but four years of his 81 years in the Lodi area. He was born in September of 1863 and died in November of 1944. He married Lena Stimson (b. 1895) in Oregon in 1891. His father, Jeremiah M. Posey, was born in Alabama in 1828, married Elizabeth (Lucas) Franklin (b. 1837) in 1855 in Texas. They traveled the southern route and arrived in California in 1858 having braved two Indian attacks and lost two of their party during the attacks.

For the price of two mules, a good value for the time, Jeremiah and Elizabeth Posey acquired 160 acres of land one mile north of the Ray School and five miles west of Woodbridge. A small three-room shack was constructed for the family that would eventually include 7 children.

Farmers were fortunate to make a living. They could borrow little or nothing on the land, but taxes were \$10-\$15 per year per quarter section. They could exchange commodities with the General Store and trade horses with their neighbors.

Wives enjoyed themselves at quilting parties. Dancing parties were held at neighboring houses and everyone was invited. The violin (fiddle) and guitar were the more common instruments of the day. Neighbors assisted each other, especially at the time of medical needs or death, acting as nurses and undertakers.

In 1866 Elizabeth was taken ill with a severe cold. She had been picking blackberries on the Mokelumne River when she fell into a hole filled with water. The cold developed into pulmonary trouble and she suffered for a year before Jeremiah moved her to Sutter Creek. She lingered there for a short time before Jeremiah called their seven children to the bedside of their mother and told them that their mother was going away on a long journey.



▲ Turner School District, formed in November of 1863. This particular school was built in 1910. Oval Inset Above: John M. Posey, as a young man.



▲ 1916; Students of Turner School, on Turner and Ray Roads. First row: 1st girl is Helen (Perrin) Maley; 2nd girl is Louise Sovice, 3rd girl is Beatrice Sovice. Third row: 2nd boy is Everett (Bud) Maley.

Most of the children were still very young. John was only two and did not remember his mother.

After the death of his wife, Jeremiah moved the young family back to the Posey Ranch. The two eldest daughters were 13 years old while Anna Elizabeth was only an infant. Jeremiah resumed his ranch work and also ran freight to Carson and Virginia Cities leaving the older girls to look after the younger children. Jeremiah became ill and then had an accident. Jackson, the eldest son, drove him to San Francisco in a covered wagon to see the doctor. Returning home, Jeremiah realized that he would soon be with his wife so he began to place the children with various families. The youngest, Anna Elizabeth, was placed with Mr. & Mrs. Metcalf. Anna died shortly after and was buried in the Woodbridge Cemetery. Agnes was placed with the Lawrence Family. William was placed with the Herrin Family. Margaret and Julia married



▲ Ray School, located at Ray and Peltier Roads. This building built in 1909.



Photo courtesy of the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection

Freight Wagons in the Lodi area, circa 1905. ▲

before the death of their father and John was placed with the Dornbach Family. (Their name was Dunbar in English.)

John recalls, "I remember the day my father and brother Jackson hauled me to my new home in a two horse wagon. It was in the month of June 1867. I remember they had a tree of early peaches...I enjoyed them very much. I soon made up with my new home and the surroundings. I learned to love my new parents...I still have a faint recollection when Mr. Dunbar, my brother Jack and I walked 1.5 miles to see father the night before he died. The next morning we returned and he had passed to the great beyond...father was buried in the Woodbridge Cemetery."

In 1868, orphans had to make the best of their lot. Many lived with neighbors or forged out a living for themselves. John wrote, "My brother William was less fortunate than Agnes and I. When the Herrin's started him (William) to school, Mrs. Herrin cut the pant legs of her husband's overalls and William wore them to

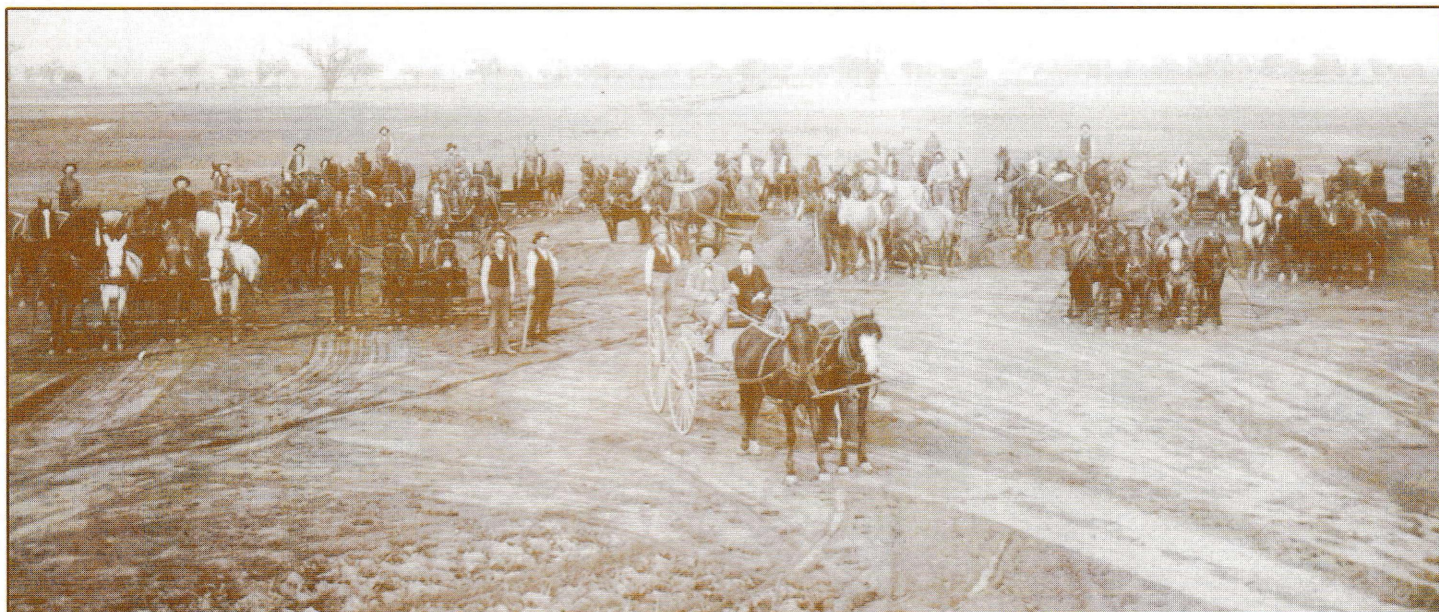
school. I can remember how the boys tantalized him. He quit school shortly afterwards and Mr. Herrin put the boy to work on the farm. There was no law to force parents to send their children to school. You could see William out at the woodpile in the early morning. He was barefooted on those frosty mornings chopping wood." Later William lived with the Harsner family.

The Dunbar Family, Jacob and his wife Caroline, were born in Germany. They met at a tannery and leather factory and soon married. Jacob came to Stockton around 1859 and he sent for Caroline in 1861 after purchasing 160 acres of property nine miles west of Lodi.

One of the stories that John recalls Mr. Dunbar relating to him was about the 1862 flood. John wrote, "The back waters of the Sacramento, San Joaquin and Mokelumne Rivers inundated the entire country. The flood came in the night and rose rapidly. The water put the fire out in the cook stove, their bedroom was somewhat higher but

the water covered the floor. It was a stormy night...wind and heavy rain...they attempted thrice to reach Jacob Bracks home located 1/2 mile south, but lost their way. The next day they managed to reach Mr. Bracks ranch...other neighbors arrived...Bracks house was a two-story house, so all moved upstairs. It is claimed that on account of the flooring being not nailed, the house shifted on the foundation...The Dunbar home was washed away. Everything was lost...clothing, cash, jewelry, horses, hogs and poultry. I recall many times saying they saw a two-story house floating by the Brack home. A raft was made out of a wagon bed and floated to the building. There were no occupants within...later a meat shop floated by."

After the floodwaters subsided Mr. Brack bought some hogs. Mr. Dunbar went hunting for ducks and set his gun down against a fence. The hogs brushed against the gun causing it to discharge striking Dunbar's right hand. The roads were impassable for teams so Mr. & Mrs. Dunbar walked to Wood-



▲ 1890; The Joseph Spenker Ranch, including 90 horses and mules; leveling land with Fresno Scrapers, north of the house.

Photo courtesy of Wanda Bechthold

bridge to Dr. Belvel who dressed the wound. They then walked home totaling 16 miles. All those in the flood zone had to use their energies to start anew. There was no redwood lumber cut in California at that time so everyone searched for driftwood and pine boards. The Dunbars' found enough wood to build a three-room shack.

It was in this house that John lived for the next 17 years starting in 1867. Dunbar was later forced to mortgage the ranch for \$1,500 to put up other buildings. Wheat became one of the chief crops and with the soil being so good it was not long before the mortgage was paid off. John remembered that he accompanied Mr. Dunbar 18 miles to Stockton hauling 40 sacks of wheat to sell for \$1.25-\$2.15 per cwt. They would leave at 3 a.m. and arrive in Stockton at about 10 a.m. Samples of grain were taken from several of the bags by prospective buyers such as J.D. Peters, Mr. Boswich and Mr. Perry. They used a tin trier to get samples of grain. If they were satisfied with the quality, bids were made, the grain was unloaded and the farmers were paid in gold. The gold was taken home and buried as there were few banks in the area in those days.

In looking back John wrote, "The early pioneers of California were men of worth and integrity. They broke the path of the wilderness that others

might enjoy the fruits of their hardships. Most of the immigrants were poor people but the resources of a great state were here although undeveloped. Mining, cattle raising and small farming were the chief products. Small farmers would plant about 25 acres to barley to be consumed by the mules and horses that were their only mode of transportation. Most of the extra barley was hauled to Carson and Virginia Cities where it was redistributed...It required two weeks to make the round trip...the highways...were narrow and rough and in many places a mere trail. The road was constructed by private interests and was a toll road. The roads were only open for travel from the first of June to October 15th...The market price for barley varied from six to eight cents per pound. The early farmers were too poor to fence their land. Cattle roamed at will. Many of the farmers owned sheep dogs to scare the cattle away at night. Often they would get up in the night to frighten the cattle away from their crops. This was kept up until the grain ripened. There were only trails winding throughout the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. Frequent floods inundated the land and left the roads in miserable condition."

John was now living at the Dunbar home. Elk were abundant in the area. He remembered, "an English-

man by the name of Tom Plitz killed six elk and I have witnessed thousands of elk horns on the low lands...people hauled the horns away, many of them were kept for souvenirs. Our township was named Elkhorn Township...there was an abundance of grazing land in the valley when the hills were covered with snow."

Trapping of fur animals and hunting of wild ducks and geese were occupations enjoyed by some. Hunters could make from \$10-\$20 a day while enjoying the sport of hunting. Most of the fur and game was shipped to San Francisco. Farmers also hunted to provide food for their families. The feathers from the ducks and geese were picked and used for feather beds.

John recalls, "My first day of school I well remember, in the old pine board schoolhouse...two miles east of the Dunbar Ranch and located on the Bolt Ranch...the name of the school was Turner named after an old pioneer Frank Turner. He was a trustee at this time. My teacher was Weston. I walked to school with the Jacob Brack children. Mr. Dunbar instructed me before I left for school that my teacher would ask my name and I must speak very loud. So when roll was called, I spoke up at the top of my voice 'Johnnie Marion Posey Dunbar.' Of course the school roared with laughter. I didn't laugh. I could



Crews and equipment were moved where needed at the Henry Pope Ranch. Pictured is stationary harvesting. ▲

not understand where the joke came in, however, I seemed to make quite a hit with the whole school."

"My sister Agnes lived in the same district and attended the same school so I felt quite at home. My seatmate was Jake Sargent and I took many lickings from him, this was due to my foster parents instructing me to take no stock in fighting. This went on for about three terms...At the age of nine I concluded I would not stand for any more beatings from any of the boys...the time came when I made my own decision. Jake Sargent had

acquired the habit of folding his arms and then making a run at me when I was off my guard and knocking me to the ground. The next day I was prepared when he attempted the same trick. We were 40 yards apart and came together with a thud. Jake fell to the ground. He was bleeding from the mouth and some of his teeth were loosened. His watch was broken and he wanted me to pay for it. I was not hurt except the jar when we collided...the school bell rang and we went to class. This ended our troubles and we became intimate

friends." Jake was the son of Rosswell Sargent.

By the age of nine John could milk three cows, tend poultry and help with the many chores around the farm. He also attended school, most of the time. Being a boy he liked to go fishing even on school days. He recalled, "I left home at the regular time and met up with Jake Sargent and William Woods (Schoochie) and headed for Sycamore Slough...We swam and I had a very narrow escape from drowning...the bank was so steep that I couldn't get up...as I



Building levees on Bethany Isle on the San Joaquin River (four miles from Mohrs Landing). ▲



▲ Stacking loose hay at the Blakeley Ranch, northwest of Lodi; John Blakeley, Andy Blakeley, Floyd Blakeley, Edd Blakeley and John Stramhan.

came to the surface Bill grabbed me by the hair and I was saved." Skipping school a second and last time occurred shortly after the first. Bill and John went fishing on Sycamore Slough again and caught a lot of fish. They arrived home at the same time they would have if they had attended school. John would not dare to take his fish home so Bill took all the fish. The next Sunday they went fishing again and John took all the fish home and they were "square on the fishing account."

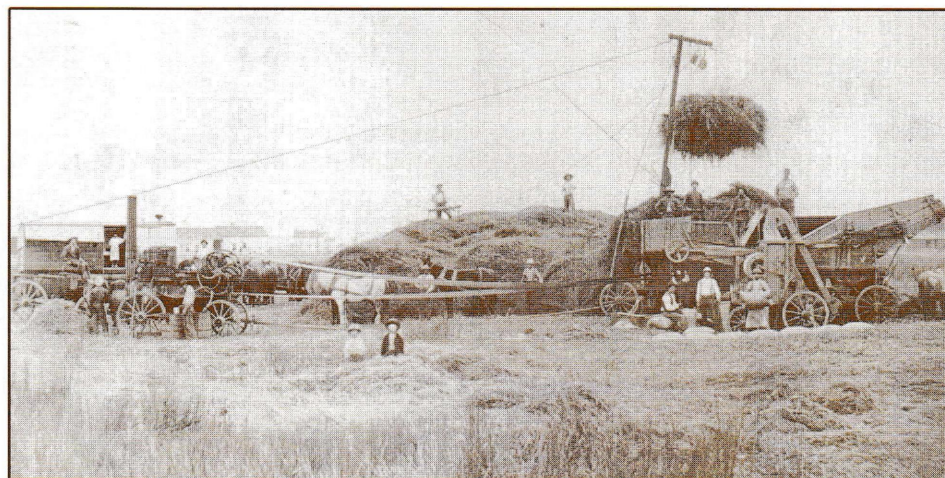
Jake Sargent went on to medical school, and to New York and London. William (Bill) Woods and John became close friends. By the age of 13 they had learned to handle a shotgun and hunted ducks and geese in the tule lands west of the Lodi area including the island country. These islands, comprising over 36,000 acres, were swamp and overflow land and was not farmed and covered with tules. During the summer cattle would graze on this land. John recalls, "About this time R.C. Sargent was elected to the assembly and through his influence a bill was passed by the legislature which was called the 'Swamp & Overflow & Reclamation Act.' It provided giving any citizen the right to construct levees to reclaim any amount of land he desired and as much land as he desired to reclaim.

Sargent and many others immediately employed thousands of Chinese who were furnished with sod-cutters and wheelbarrows to construct small levees along the riverbank."

John wrote, "These levees did not exceed four feet in height and were not packed. After the sod settled approximately one foot the flimsy levee of three feet would not even resist the pressure of high tide and during the winter months the floods would entirely obliterate the so called levees. However, the Chinese were continually employed so that the farmer would gain title to the land from the state. After two years the Reclamation Act was cancelled inasmuch as granting title to the

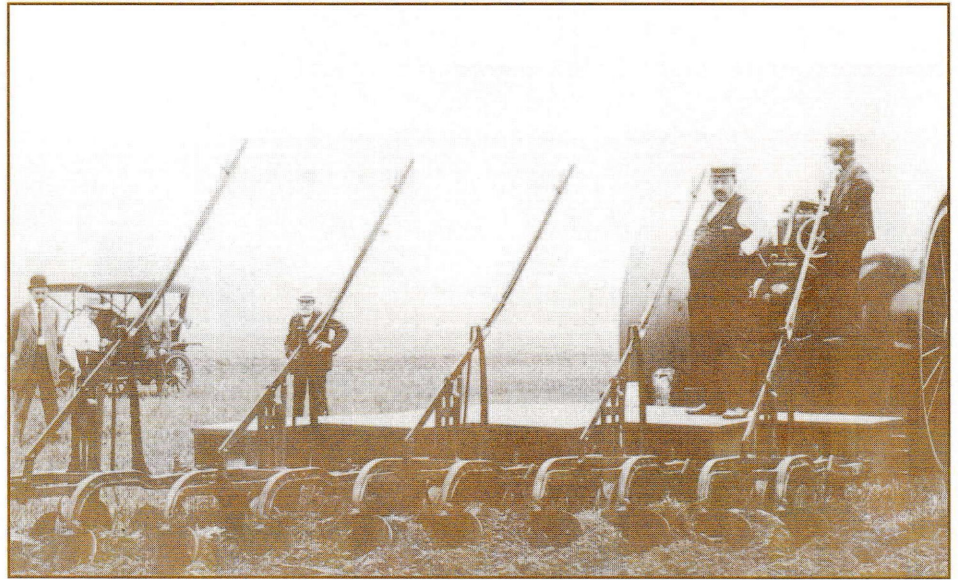
land, however by this time nearly all of the lowlands were secured thru the act by the construction of sham levees ...fires would be set to clear the land of tules which would then allow other less vigorous grasses to grow for grazing purposes."

John loved the farm and farming even in those days of limited equipment. He describes the old gang plow as "consisting of three 8 inch single plows bolted together with a heavy cross iron...frame had three wheels, with no swivel wheel. While turning corners, the driver would have to lift the gangplow to prevent turning the plow upside down. After plowing a few acres the farmer would strap his 40-50 pound sowing sack around his



▲ J. H. Williams pictured at the Siemering Ranch. Note the long distance belting that ran from the tractor to the stationary harvester.

shoulders. Three stakes were set in the ground and by flinging the grain with the right or left hand the farmer would sow a strip of land about 14 feet wide. Some farmers could use both right and left hands and could sow a strip 24 feet wide. After sowing, two horses were hitched on a small harrow and the grain was harrowed in. After the grain ripened it was cut with the old fashioned reaper. This was operated by two men-the driver and the man who raked the grain off the platform where the reel knocked the grain. There was no draper to elevate the grain. One of the men raked the grain off the windrows ...the farmer hauled the grain that was pitched off the wagon on low stacks. Next came the thrashing outfit...called a horsepower machine. The thrashing machine was called a vibrator...twelve horses were hitched in a circle to the horsepower and a rod was connected to the cylinder of the vibrator. In the center of the machine, or horsepower, was a circular platform about five feet in



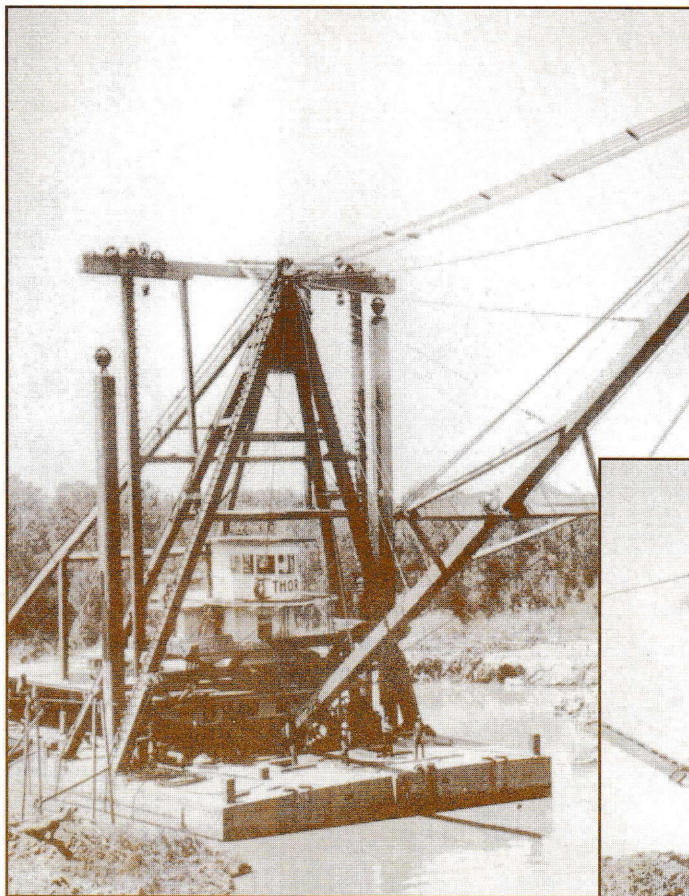
▲ Stockton Gang Plows were a big help at the Towne Ranch.

diameter where the driver stood. He held no lines but used a 4 horse whip to check up on the slow horses...A man stood in the front of the cylinder to feed the thrasher, two table men forked the grain to him, there were no derrick forks in use at the time. After thrashing was done and

the grain hauled, the cows and hogs were turned onto the stubble to eat the wasted grain and straw. Most of the farmers stacked the straw for winter use...most farmers raised 300-400 head of poultry and some ducks, turkeys, hogs and a garden. Eight to 15 hogs were butchered in early fall



Tractors finally replaced horses in California harvesting. ▲

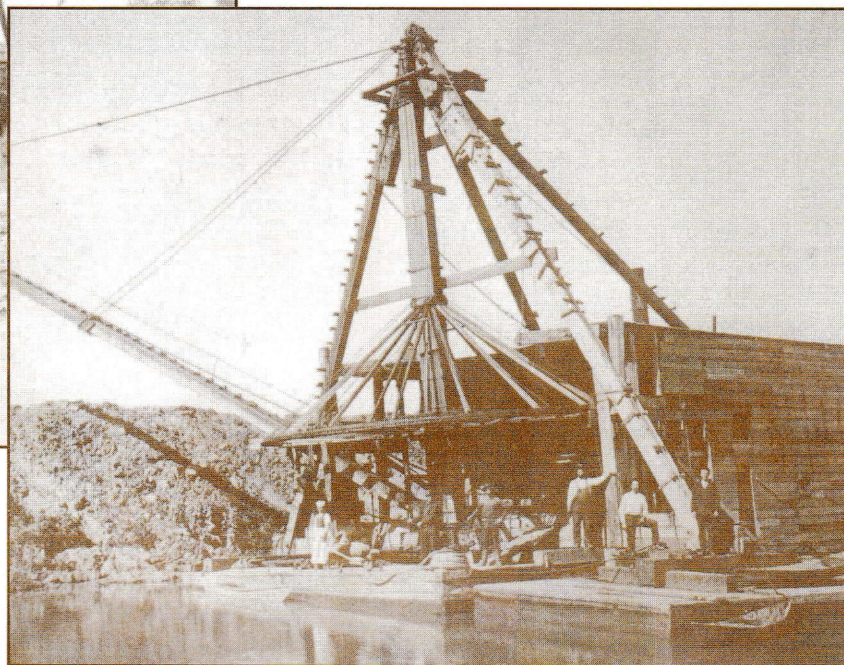


▲ Dredge Thor, 1903.



STORY WILL CONTINUE...

*including John's Romance,
Marriage, Family and
Watermelon Farming.*



▲ Dredge Gwynn, circa 1878; crews lived on the dredge, note the Chinese cook on left.

THE LODI HISTORIAN

is a quarterly publication of the Lodi Historical Society
P.O. Box 264, Lodi, CA 95241-0264

*Ralph Lea Editor
*Lucy Reller Assistant Editor

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and were brined or smoked. Wheat was hauled to the Green Flouring Mill that was located at the head-gates of the Woodbridge Canal Co.”

In the late 1870's the header and derrick were invented. The header elevated the grain into the header wagon and the derrick was used to unload the grain. These were great time saving devises. With the invention of wagon net in the early 1880's a wagon could be unloaded in 3 minutes.

At the age of 13 John was employed to drive the fork horse, the Madison fork was used at the

time. He received a \$1.00 per day and board. He moved from farm to farm with the crew. His wages were applied to Mr. Dunbar's account or his harvest bill. By age 16, John was driving a header wagon and receiving \$2.00 per day and board. They often slept in the header wagon that provided them with plenty of fresh air. About this time the steam engine came into use replacing the old horse power outfit that was used to operate the thrasher. Wood or straw was used as fuel to create the steam.